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Mideast Policy: In Hibernation

President Reagan has unexpectedly and quietly revealed to the American Jewish community that Israeli settlements on the West Bank no longer pose an "obstacle" to peace, a policy change avidly sought by Prime Minister Menachem Begin that signals pre-election hibernation for U.S. Mideast policy and grave dangers for Egypt and Jordan.

Such hibernation has become the norm as the American presidential election approaches, given the importance of the Jewish vote. But in contrast to the past, this year's abrupt switch from dynamic to passive attention toward the explosive Mideast could prove costly.

The switch certifies that the president's bold Sept. 1, 1982, peace plan is dead. With Begin due here for a triumphant official visit next month, Israel is exonerated from last year's global condemnation over the invasion of Lebanon. Ronald Reagan, whose own harsh criticism of Israel last year angered Begin, hopes that the 1984 Republican presidential campaign now can be conducted against a backdrop of solid U.S.-Israeli relations.

The president's surprising switch on new Jewish settlements on the Palestinian-populated West Bank came in a recent dialogue not yet generally reported. Unable to attend a national convention of editors and writers for Jewish newspapers in Coral Gables, Fla., May 26, Reagan did an amplified question-and-answer session over the telephone. "Do you now see the settlements . . . as any obstacle to peace?" he was asked. Reagan tried to duck the question, but when Al Bloom of the Pittsburgh Jewish Chronicle repeated it, the president replied: "No, I don't, I really don't."

Although Reagan added a little later that he was hopeful for a "moratorium" on settlements during West Bank political negotiations, he had unmistakably junked the "obstacle to peace" formulation. That careful phrase has

described the U.S. settlements policy throughout the Reagan administration.

At about the same time, a private warning to Washington was coming from Cairo: even under the most promising of circumstances, the Soviet Union could not be excluded indefinitely from the Middle East. That warning was issued behind closed doors at a Manhattan seminar by Osama el-Baz, the political adviser to Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, Reagan's most important Arab friend. It reflected Cairo's new outlook in the face of U.S. passivity.

Mubarak worries that this American hibernation over the next 18 months not only will confirm and expand the growing Soviet role in Syria but pose a dilemma for Egypt quite apart from the Kremlin's re-entry into the region. Cairo can renew cordial relations with Israel despite continued colonization of the West Bank, inviting a political storm at home; or it can keep the Egyptian-Israeli connection in a freeze, provoking retaliation from the U.S. Congress.

If Mubarak is compelled to normalize Israeli relations without compensating concessions on the West Bank question, the threat to the Egyptian leader will not be merely political. U.S. intelligence specialists have warned Reagan's policy-makers that Mubarak might follow Anwar Sadat as an assassination target of Moslem extremists.

Pre-election hibernation of U.S. Mideast policy also carries grave threats for Jordan. If Begin's government rushes ahead with settlements and Reagan does nothing, thousands of Palestinians will, in fact, be driven across the Jordan River into Hussein's kingdom. It would then be only a matter of time before Hussein is overthrown by dissident Palestinians.

Hussein has been forced publicly to threaten that he will close Jordan's borders if the Israelis drive Palestinians out of the West Bank. But U.S. policy-makers know that Hussein could never carry out such a threat. Palestinians in his kingdom, numbering well over half the population, would not permit it.

One final danger arising from a free hand for Israel over the next 18 months lies in Lebanon, where Syria holds the trump card on withdrawal of Israel's invasion force. The swift post-invasion buildup of Soviet missile forces in Syria is certain to continue so long as Israel's army remains in Lebanon.

Withdrawal of Syrian and Israeli forces from Lebanon, the heart of Shultz's Lebanese policy, was most difficult even before the American presidential campaign intruded. With Mideast policy in Washington adjourned for the duration of that campaign, troop withdrawal will be impossible and Soviet influence will grow. Such is the high price of American politics.

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